

## From Duxbury to the silver (and now the TV) screen?

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Mildred Pierce – Coming to a TV screen near you! “Mildred Pierce” the 1945 movie featuring Joan Crawford in an Academy Award-winning performance based on James M. Cain’s novel of the same name will be reprised on HBO in April with Kate Winslet in the starring role and Todd Haynes directing. As you may know from my previous story on Mildred Pierce (Duxbury Clipper, Feb. 17, 2010) I’m convinced that Cain’s novel “Mildred Pierce” was inspired by Duxbury’s Mildred A. “Ma” Pierce. I can now provide more evidence, circumstantial though it may be, to reinforce my convictions.

Let’s review the facts about Ma Pierce that were the same as those in Cain’s book. First and most evident, the names were the same, so when I’m referring to the book I’ll use Mildred, when I’m referring to Duxbury’s Ma Pierce, I’ll use Ma. Both their husbands were home builders and both husbands had left them. Both women ran a restaurant by themselves, the restaurants

were in a seaside location, and both made a lemon pie that was very popular. Duxbury’s Ma had a daughter, who sang opera and a brilliant daughter, who was spoiled; Cain’s Mildred had a daughter, Veda, with both of those character traits. And last, but most significant, both lost their boyfriend to their daughter.

That is a considerable list and taken individually they could be coincidental, but taken as a whole, they represent a compelling argument that Ma Pierce was the model for Mildred. How often does a daughter end up with a man 35 years her senior, who was her mother’s boyfriend? I know things like that happen, but with all those other things and then ending up in Cain’s book one year later, come on, now!

In recent months I have read Roy Hoopes’ biography of James M. Cain, chiefly to see if he ever places Cain in Duxbury or on the South Shore. First, I’d like to go over some of the other insight Hoopes gave to the case. Cain’s book starts in the spring of 1931, and at that time Mildred’s daughters were 11 and

7. In the spring of 1930, Ma’s two youngest daughters were 11 and 7.



James M. Cain’s novel “Mildred Pierce” was a successful movie with Joan Crawford (right) in the title role. The book is being remade as a mini-series on HBO with Kate Winslet (above) as Pierce. The writer believes he has discovered evidence linking Cain with Duxbury, and that he based Pierce’s characters on Duxbury’s Mildred “Ma” Pierce. For example, both women ran a restaurant by themselves in a seaside location, and both lost their boyfriend to their daughter.

Cain, when young, was an aspiring operatic singer until his mother, who was also a singer, told him he didn’t “have the voice for it.” What a blow that must have been! For the rest of his life, Cain was as much devoted to opera as he was to writing. In 1947 he married (his fourth wife) an opera singer, Florence MacBeth, whom he had admired when he was younger, and they remained happily married for 19 years until her death in 1966. Many of his stories, including “Mildred Pierce,” were about singers.



Ma Pierce’s daughter Myrtle sang the lead role in an operetta staged at Duxbury High School. The school had a reputation for putting on very successful operettas. She also sang at her graduation and went on to do some singing on a local radio station in Plymouth. Myrtle was the older of the two girls still in the area during the time of Cain’s visit.

In Cain’s book he has the youngest daughter die of fever or flu. At first, I thought my whole theory about Mildred was going up in smoke when I figured from Ma’s youngest daughter’s birth date that she

Mildred Pierce

would have graduated in 1941. Cain's book came out in late 1941, leaving little or no time for him to observe the difficulties that the Pierce family was to endure.

Ma's youngest daughter, Nina, was a brilliant woman who was planning to be a surgeon, not just a doctor, but specifically a surgeon. She graduated from Duxbury High School in three years, a feat rarely, if ever, accomplished at that time. In November of 1940 she had passed her exams and was waiting for a vacancy to enter training at Massachusetts General Hospital. Ma's youngest daughter was clearly ambitious and on a plane above her mother.



**Nina Pierce, the daughter of Duxbury's "Ma" Pierce, may have been the inspiration for the character Veda in James Cain's novel, "Mildred Pierce." The characters have much in common, including running off with their mothers' beau.**

Cain was having difficulty writing an ending to his book. He had written four versions and each time, in Cain's own words, "almost on cue, at page 254, the thing fell apart right in front of my eyes." I think that he was writing about Ma's Myrtle and when the other sister took away her mother's boyfriend - boom! He had an ending and combined the two characters. He said later that he had "made Veda too smart."

Hoopes describes Cain as "not attracted to the glittering social life of New York ... he preferred more serious intellectual conversation with like minded friends." Hoopes continues with, "parties he attended and gave were typical village affairs with often no chairs, cushions or even mats to sit on." Ma Pierce's youngest daughter, in correspondence with Margery MacMillan during preparation of her book "Stopping Places Along Duxbury Roads" (1991), wrote that "...many people who came to eat would ask to sit in the kitchen and were allowed. As mother was cooking, she would always entertain her guests with many stories. All were repeat guests. Several came from N.Y. every year." This would have been a perfect setting for Cain.

Hoopes writes about Cain's writing habits and his unusual personality. He possibly knew Cain better than anyone, simply because he

had access to his papers and to Cain himself. He mentions a story given to Cain by William Gilbert Patten in 1928, "about two westerners who had cut off a man's head, and didn't know what to do when it started rolling around in their wagon; Cain shifted the story east, added some characters of his own, and put the story in the mouth of an eastern roughneck." This story about Cain's methods indicates to me that if he could move a story from west to east, he certainly was not above moving "Mildred Pierce" from Duxbury to California.

I also find it significant that the standard fiction disclaimer in "Mildred Pierce" (in the original version) is beyond the usual "...are not intended to represent actual persons, events, or places" and is preceded by "The locale of this book is California..." To me, Cain is deliberately leading the reader away from the people in Duxbury he is writing about. Especially, since he once wrote to his publisher that he considered such disclaimers thinly veiled announcements that the story was based on reality.

"By 1930 James M. Cain the writer had clearly emerged" in the opinion of biographer Hoopes. He wrote that "Cain liked to shock his readers, but to write his best he had to pretend to be someone else. Yet with his limited imagination almost everything he wrote had to be based on personal experience or things he had observed happening to others."



**Duxbury's "MA" Pierce ran a restaurant in town in the '20s and, this author believes, served as the inspiration for James M. Cain's novel "Mildred Pierce."**

This reliance on actual events is evident in Cain's "Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Double Indemnity." Both were based on the trial of "Tiger Woman" Ruth Snyder and her lover, Judd Gray and their murder of her husband. Ruth purchased personal injury insurance on her husband and "double indemnity" in the event of his death. She instructed the postman to deliver payment coupons only to her, ringing the doorbell twice as a signal. So two of Cain's most successful books were suggested by real life situations, why not the third?

In August of 1938 Cain's play "7-11" was performed by the South Shore Players at the Cohasset Town Hall (the precursor of the South Shore Music Circus). Cain's old drinking pal Sinclair Lewis was appearing on stage in his own play "It Can't Happen Here." Lewis' play appeared the week of July 25 and again on August 8 and was postponed at least once. According to the Cohasset Historical Society, Cain's play was moved to the week of August 22. Cain was here for a good part of that summer and I thought into September rewriting his play. Cain's play



tarred Nancy Carrol, Sheila Barrett and Barry Sullivan.

Cohasset had somewhat limited hotel space and the nearest alternative sites included Nantasket and Duxbury, which was experiencing its own theater and tourist renaissance. There was a hotel owned by Louise Chandler St. George at the corner of Soule Avenue and Tremont Street, called The

The Shore Acres Inn, which catered to theater people. If any of the cast of his play were staying there, it would not have been out of the ordinary for Cain to stay there too. The interesting thing is, if he did, he would be driving by Ma Pierce's restaurant on the way to Cohasset every day!

It should be pointed

out that Cain was a heavy drinker and a notorious womanizer. I'm not suggesting that he had an illicit relationship with any of these women, but he certainly would have been comfortable in Ma's kitchen.

A brief description of Ma's youngest daughter might be appropriate here. She, as did all of Ma's daughters, worked part time at her mother's restaurant. As to her being spoiled, several contemporaries pointed out that she wore high heels and dresses to school, while most of the girls wore skirts and sweaters. Other contemporaries have described her as self-centered, ambitious, a loner, and a person who "put on airs." If you are familiar with Veda in the book and movie, that describes

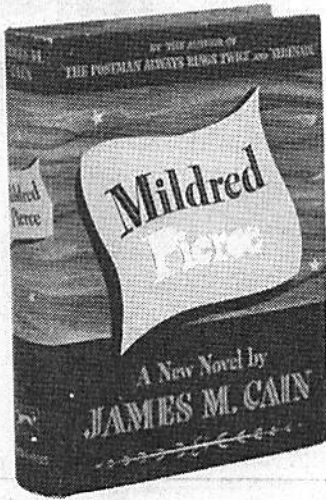
her quite well.

An examination of the timeline of these events is revealing. In 1938, Cain visits the area at least once. Hoopes confirms that Cain began writing "Mildred Pierce" after a visit to Cohasset in 1938. By 1939 he's struggling to finish his book. If my supposition is true, he's watching the interaction of Ma, her daughter and Ma's boyfriend. Ma's daughter started high school in 1937, which meant she should have graduated in 1941. By finishing in three years, graduating in 1940 and taking up with Ma's boyfriend, she provided Cain with the perfect ending to his story. In the words of one of her classmates, "the story was all over town."

There is another possible Cain connection to Duxbury, and that is the Sjostedt family. Cain was married to Elina Sjostedt (the difference in spelling is probably not significant) Tyszecka from 1927 until 1947. They were married during Cain's most successful years, during which he wrote "Postman," "Double Indemnity" and "Mildred Pierce." Hoopes quotes Cain as saying, "She had a beautiful mind, particularly for one writing the

things I write – sardonic, ironic, sometimes almost savage in its comprehensions of basic things. There was always her amusing point of view, expressed with this preposterous accent, so fresh, so delightful, that I have seen saleswomen in department stores gather around her, to listen a few minutes and be entertained by her." She must have helped with "Mildred Pierce."

Cain's book was published in September of 1941. Critic Ralph Thompson wrote, "How Cain could ever tangle himself up with this prodigious, incredible, preposterous child is almost as hard to understand as Veda (Mildred's daughter) herself." Other reviews were



**James M. Cain's novel has much in common with Duxbury's "Ma" Pierce, and the author often looked to true events for inspiration. His books "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Double Indemnity" were based on a real court case.**

not so kind; some were complimentary. "To all those who said that the unattractive people in *Mildred Pierce* simply did not exist, Cain's reply was: "I can only say, as Shaw said of Pinero, 'Doesn't this fellow meet anybody?'" Isn't this an admission on Cain's part that his characters were based on real people?

A two-day research visit to the Library of Congress, with daughter Erin, poring over James M. Cain's papers (96 boxes) has produced mixed results. Most significantly, the 1938 box is not in the collection. Hoopes reports Cain's secretary lost or destroyed the box. That is the year that we know Cain was on the South Shore, and now we know that he was here from Aug. 8 until Nov. 18, a period of three months, two months after his play had closed in Cohasset. Elina had gone home in early September. Where was he and what was he doing?

Cain had been sued twice, once for "obscenity" in his novel "Serenade," and once for plagiarism, relating to a woman who claimed she had delivered a script similar to "Mildred Pierce" to Cain's N.Y. office in 1937 for advice and a possible sale. Cain did not have a N.Y. office in 1937, he did not review other author's work and the story was nothing like "Mildred Pierce." The movie company paid the woman \$750 as a settlement of a nuisance suit, none of which came out of Cain's pocket.

These cases wore considerably on Cain. In addition, a man named Richard Fuller wrote to Knopf, Cain's publisher, saying he was concerned about his wife's reputation as her name was Mildred Pierce. Both Cain and the publisher refused to change the name and Mr. Fuller finally signed off.

All of these events had Cain deeply worried. He forwarded his "Mildred Pierce" papers to the lawyer in the plagiarism case. Were the 1938 papers lost or destroyed? Might Cain have destroyed them himself? It seems strange to me that after moving across the country several times that all his papers are in the collection except 1938! It appears that any concrete evidence of Cain staying in Duxbury will have to come from another source, and I'll be looking.